Bishop John - Standing in the Gap - Intercession

5th Mar 2012

He always lives to make intercession for them (us). Heb.7.25
Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Rom.8.34
I begin like this to remind us that **intercession and all our praying is rooted in His prayer for us**. All true prayer is Christ in us (John 15.7) and the Holy Spirit interceding through us (Rom.8.26). What is intercession? Intercession is praying for others, intercession is pleading another's cause before God, intercession is even standing before God in the shoes of the other. **It derives from God in us and reflects God's love and God's longing for *all* people to be saved**. God's love is expressed in his profound identification with us in all our human frailty. In the Incarnation of the Word become flesh, St John tells us, he pitches his tent among ours. As we remembered on Sunday, Jesus, who was without sin, was baptised in John's baptism of repentance, identifying with us in our own need of redeeming and forgiveness. Jesus is *tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin* (Heb.4.15) .Jesus dies for us, in our place, '*He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you (we) have been healed.'* (1 Peter 2.24) Intercession, in Jesus' name, is an expression of God's love and longing for all to be reconciled in Christ.
I didn't especially want to lead a session on 'how to lead intercessions in Church', important though that undoubtedly is, because I wanted to stress that **we are *all* called to the ministry of intercession** in Jesus' name whether or not we are called to lead intercessions in Church. Leading intercession in Church is but a tip of the iceberg of the whole of the ministry of intercession most of which is unseen and unheard. Each one of us belongs to a *holy priesthood* (1 Peter 2.4), *a royal priesthood* (1 Peter 2.8) and a *kingdom of priests* (Rev.1.5). Each of us is called to the priestly ministry of intercession. In the Levitical priesthood of the Old Testament, the priest stood before God to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people and to intercede for them. We heard on Ash Wednesday God's words through Joel '*Between the vestibule and the altar, let the priests, the ministers of the Lord weep. Let them say 'Spare your people, O Lord.*' (Joel 2.17) The priest represents the people to God and God to the people. Michael Ramsey describes intercession as 'coming to God with the people on your heart and coming to the people with God on your heart.' As Christians, as those living 'in Christ', our priesthood is no longer Levitical but a spiritual priesthood rooted in Jesus the great High Priest (Heb.4.14). All our intercession is rooted in 'the one mediator between God and humanity, Jesus Christ' (1 Tim.2.5). Jesus is the Bridge. In Him and in His name we pray. Jesus said 'If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you will and it will be done for you.' (John 15.7) **Without this organic relationship with God, we cannot intercede**, we cannot represent the people to God or God to the people.
Intercession is part of the ministry of reconciliation. Being a bridge. The root meaning of the word Paul uses for reconciliation can mean standing in the shoes of the other, even exchanging places. Intercession and reconciliation involves the

Christ-like identification with the other in his or her need. He became as us that we might become as he. He came to earth that we might enter heaven.
Moses is able to stand between God and God's faithless people because Moses has met with God, in the wilderness when God speaks to him through the bush burning, alive with the glory of God (Exod.3.6), and on the mountain top (Exod.19) where God speaks to him 'face to face' (Numb.12.8). Moses intercedes for the people of God again and again (Numbers 14, Exodus 32). The events of Exodus 32, when the people turn to idolatry by making and worshipping a golden calf, are summarised in Psalm 106: '*At Horeb they made a calf and worshipped an idol made of metal. They exchanged their Glory for an image of a bull which eats grass. They forgot the God, who saved them, who had done great things in Egypt, miracles in the land of Ham and awesome deeds by the Red Sea. So he said he would destroy them – had not Moses, his chosen one,* ***stood in the breach before him****, to keep his wrath from destroying* them.' (Ps.106 19-23). Moses stands in the gap. This is the Christ like ministry, **standing in the gap**, being the bridge. In Ezekiel, God longs to find such a person to avert the consequences of His judgement. '*And I* ***looked for a man that would stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land****, but I found none, so I will pour out my wrath on them*.' (Ezek. 22.30-31) God surely longs for such bridge people today to stand before him on behalf of others.

Abraham too, having met with God, becomes an intercessor. Abraham and Sarah in welcoming three strangers and offering them the very best of their hospitality discover that they have met with God. Their hospitality to the strangers opens up a new dimension in their relationship with God. God speaks to them directly with the most extraordinary promise 'This time next year Sarah will have a son' (Gen 18.10). In this new relationship God wants to share with Abraham his intentions to act in judgement on the people of Sodom. 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?' It is from this personal encounter with God that Abraham has the confidence to plead with God, to intercede for the people of Sodom. Listen to this extraordinary boldness: 'Will you destroy the righteous people there? Far be it from you! Will not the judge of the earth do right?' (Gen.18.26) What boldness! The Lord says 'For the sake of fifty, I will not destroy it?' 'What if there are forty-five righteous people there?' 'For the sake of forty-five I will not destroy it.' Abraham goes on and on down to ten righteous people and God says 'for the sake of ten, I will not destroy it.' What persistence!
We see here two vitally important dimensions of intercessionary prayer: **boldness** and **perseverance.** Jesus underlines the importance of both. In the parable of the Importunate Friend (Luke 11.5-13) and in the parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18.1-8), it is boldness and persistence in asking that yields results. Jesus is saying 'keep asking, keep praying'. We are not to give up in prayer and we are to be bold, confident in praying. Perhaps living as comfortably as most of us do, we have become a bit too tepid in our praying, too polite or even, in Shakespearian language, too 'lily-livered' even too cowardly. We might think 'Well why would God want to listen to *me?*' which would be an entirely wrong kind of modesty before God. Such an attitude reveals a failure to believe and trust the promises of God. Knowledge of our frailty and falling short far from being a barrier to intercessionary prayer is almost a requisite. As children of God, we need to have a child like confidence in our heavenly Father. 'If you being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give good gifts (Matthew 7.11) (the Holy Spirit, Luke 11.11) to those who ask him'. As Christians we are those who both know our own frailty and also know God's great love and mercy and provision.
One aspect of boldness in prayer is being *specific*. Sometimes general prayers as in 'Lord bless everyone' are actually an escape from specific prayers because we do not dare to believe that God who knows the number of hairs on our head is the God of

detail to whom every detail of our lives matters.
I spoke earlier of intercessionary prayer as involving both our identification with Christ, our 'in-Christness', but also our identification with or standing in the shoes of the one(s) in need of prayer. There is something profoundly Christ-like and surely moving to the heart of God when he sees His children willing to take the place of those under judgement. Moses prays to God for those who have made and worshipped false gods '*Oh what a great sin these people have committed. They have made themselves gods of gold. But now please forgive their sin –* ***but if not blot me out of the book you have written.'*** (Exod.32.31). This willingness to take on the burden of sins of others is very much a part of the Eastern Orthodox tradition of prayer and spiritual discipleship where the Spiritual Director would take on him or herself the burden of sin of the other. There is a passionate dimension to this, sharing as we do in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. It may just be that for some of you God has given you such an intimate burden of prayer for someone.
Prayer and Politics: 'I *urge then, first of all that requests, prayers, intercessions and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases our Saviour who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.' (1 Tim.2.1-5)* This is so important and this Church hasa particular opportunity in its civic role. To pray for those in Government , nationally, regionally, locally is essential, it makes a difference. Such people need our prayers and actually a great many want our prayers. Prayer changes the atmosphere, the spiritual ecology. It is good to pray specifically for councillors and politicians and the issues and decisions that they face and to this also in our public prayers.
This is perhaps particularly timely in the light of the recent very public interventions on behalf of the role of the Church and faith in the public sphere by among others the Queen, Baroness Warsi and Eric Pickles.
It is good to be known as a pray-er. Pharaoh asks Moses to pray for him (Exodus 8.28). King Jeroboam asks the man of God 'to intercede with the Lord your God and pray for me that my hand may be restored' (1 Kings 13.6). So many 'god-incidences' await us in the world around us if we are alert to pray in the market place. When I was a parish priest in a large village, much of my prayer ministry happened through one-off encounters in the local supermarket. Actually whatever some people are saying about the encroachment of militant atheism and or secularism, most people – and this includes people in positions of influence in the wider society are still, in my experience, grateful and hungry for prayer. Let's go to it!
Finally, all prayer, all intercession is in one way or another an elaboration of the daily prayer 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' As Origen wrote in his treatise on prayer, as Christians what we are about is the 'celestification of earth' the bringing of heaven to earth. 'Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.
God is passionately in love with us. He has not created the world to control us. God has created us in his image, free. He longs for us to enter into partnership, to be, as Paul puts it, *synergountes,* fellow-workers, partners with Him in the reconciling of all things in himself that Christ may 'be all in all' (I Cor.15.28) and 'the kingdoms of thios world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ' (Rev.11.15). To be an intercessor is to be a friend of God, even, as the mystics and prophets describe it a lover of God. **Amen**
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